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FM AMCONSUL CALCUTTA

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0821

INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0766

RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 0173

RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 0297

RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 0297

RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 0077

RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0178

RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON 0099

RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK 0079

RUEHKL/AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR 0014

RUEHJA/AMEMBASSY JAKARTA 0013

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

RHMFIUU/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI

RUEHKH/AMEMBASSY USAID

RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 1004

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CALCUTTA 000103

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: ANDAMAN AND NICOBAR ISLANDS STILL STRUGGLING TO RECOVER FROM 2004 TSUNAMI

REF: 05 CALCUTTA 0186

**¶1.** (SBU) SUMMARY: Over a year after suffering the tsunami disaster of December 2004, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands still have not fully recovered. The GOI's substantial mobilization of assistance, while initially laudable, has now resulted in a culture of dependency in which the population appears reluctant to begin the hard work of reconstruction. In January Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, while visiting the Andamans, publicly castigated government officials for failing to rehabilitate agricultural land and to rebuild infrastructure. Commerce, tourism and the environment are all struggling with the effects of the disaster. Officials are starting to address the more fundamental recovery problems but the tsunami's impact will be felt for many more years in the islands. END SUMMARY

**¶2.** (U) Just over a year ago, on the morning of December 26, 2004, the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago was rocked by one of the more severe earthquakes experienced in the region in recent times and were then battered by the resulting tsunami wave. The Nicobar group of islands, being closer to the quake epicenter, was hardest hit. The shifting grounds and the resulting waves changed the geography of Nicobar forever. While slightly farther away to the north, the more populated and developed Andamans experienced greater damage to infrastructure. According to official numbers, 3,513 people were killed or missing, 10,000 families were displaced, 10,837 hectare agricultural land lost, and 85 schools, 34 health centers and 24 jetties damaged. In response, over the past year the GOI provided a USD 190 million relief package, shifted 15,000 metric ton of construction material from the mainland and built 9,565 intermediate shelters spread over eight islands. However, as the relief period tapers off, the 350,000 inhabitants of the archipelago are now realizing that hard work, and not just aid, is required to rebuild their lives.

**¶3.** (SBU) The prolonged relief phase has created a culture of dependency for many of the islanders, with some in the community resisting returning to work. NGO contacts have noted instances of able-bodied islanders foregoing jobs and instead seeking free rations that are still being distributed. Recruiting local labor for construction projects is difficult because the rations are readily available, precluding the need to work for an income and food. In January, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh

castigated the island's administration for failing to create incentives to work and for poorly managing the recovery. The PM also commented that he would consider establishing a legislative assembly so that the people can select their representatives - a way of creating greater civic involvement in the reconstruction (Reftel). At present, the islands are ruled by a GOI-appointed Lieutenant Governor. As a result, the people have limited involvement in the local administration and policy issues, except at the very local village level through the recently established panchayats (village councils). Andaman officials and NGOs, more aware of the problem of complacency, are now attempting to implement more sustainable projects that will encourage self-sufficiency.

¶4. (SBU) Complicating the recovery, post sources also point out that there has been little progress on reclamation of agricultural land inundated by saltwater. In some places, especially in the northern islands, land still flooded by seawater is being used for prawn farming. However, promoting pisciculture requires training farmers in new skills. In the Nicobar group of islands, nearly 75 percent of the economically critical coconut plantations were destroyed. Because of limited work options, Nicobari tribal captain Dr. Anwar Moosa told post that once the government stops free ration, the tribals could face severe food shortages.

¶5. (SBU) Problems have also arisen in infrastructure reconstruction. Locals are unhappy with the plans for new shelters. The Planning Commission of India recommended houses made of prefabricated bamboo sheets. The less developed Nicobari tribes, struggling more to adapt to the post-tsunami circumstances, are dissatisfied with the proposed prefabricated structures and instead want to use indigenous material to build their homes in the traditional manner. In addition, NGOs like SEEDS are complaining of being left out of the shelter design

CALCUTTA 00000103 002 OF 002

phase, reducing them to be mere contractors. Rebuilding of the jetties, roads and bridges has been delayed as well, due to slow administration and the late monsoon season.

¶6. (SBU) The Andaman Islands Chamber of Commerce (ACC) president Mohammad Jadwet told post that the commercial sector is still suffering as the GOI's supply of free rations is hampering the revival of inter-island retail trade that is an important part of the islands' economy. Tourism is picking up gradually, but the high-end international tourists (divers and bird watchers) are yet to return. Eco-tourism may require more time to resume as the archipelago's fragile marine ecosystem has not completely recovered. Still after one year, the seabed continues to shift. Andaman's capital city Port Blair sunk by about 3 ft immediately after the earthquake. Recent studies show that the city has now risen by about 6 inches. Ecologists and hydrologists believe that the ecosystem will take more time to stabilize.

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: Although the GOI is attempting to wrap-up relief programs in the Andaman and Nicobar islands, as a senior Andaman official observed, "the long haul has just begun." Many islanders still have no permanent home and no prospect of employment in the near future. After Prime Minister's Singh's public admonishment, island administrators are making more of an effort to repair damaged infrastructure and restart the inter-island trade. However, the islands will suffer the lasting effects of the 2004 tsunami for many more years to come.  
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